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1561

The Missionary Church

.. By ..

BASIL MATHEWS, M.A.

LONDON MISSIONARY SOCIETY,

16, NEW BRIDGE STREET, LONDON, E.C. 4,

AND

YOUNG PEOPLE'S DEPARTMENT,

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THE MISSIONARY CHURCH

By BASIL MATHEWS, M.A.

I.

God's Missionary Spirit.—"God," as Madame Guyon said, "has an infinite desire to communicate Himself."

His desire is to communicate Himself to the whole world that He has made. God has made man not as an engineer makes a machine, forgetting it when once it has left His hands. Man is God's child—His children are estranged from Him. And because God is Father and God is love, He cannot rest till His sons come home. Because God is holy His will is that His sons share His holiness.

God cannot rest, indeed, till *all* His sons come home. When He sees them yet a long way off He runs out to meet them, and He bids His family make merry for the prodigal that has returned. His joy—the joy that is in Heaven—is more over the one that is brought back than over the ninety-nine who are already with Him. In a word, God is Missionary.

In His "infinite desire to communicate Himself" to His children, God desires to talk to them and they should speak with Him. He desires fellowship, and that His children should have fellowship both with Him and with each other.

Jesus, its Expression.—But if He is to speak to them, He must use a language that the children can understand. If He desires them to come back to Him, He must show His face to them as the face of the Father, loving and holy. In a word, if the missionary heart of God is to express itself, He must, so to speak, Himself go into the foreign missionary field, which is the world. And, in fact, He did this. “God so loved the world,” that He, in His desire for His children to be reconciled to Him, “gave Himself” in His son.

The coming of Jesus Christ to the world was, then, the supreme missionary act of God. Christ is God’s Missionary Enterprise. Livingstone crystallized this whole truth in a sentence, when he said: “God had an only Son, and He was a missionary.”

God’s Missionary Aim.—The missionary aim of God in Christ was to bring into His Kingdom all men ; or, in other words, to extend God’s rule over the whole world, through the individual. The aim of Christ’s life—His preaching, teaching and healing, His death and resurrection—was to proclaim and to effect the coming of the Kingdom of God.

The nature of that Kingdom He proclaimed as “Good News”—the Gospel as we say. It was “*news*”—that is, something freshly told to people to whom it was strange, yet who could recognise its truth when they heard it. It was “*Good News*,” for it resolved the problems, lightened the sorrows, and redeemed and cleansed the lives of those who heard and accepted it.

The very essence of the whole enterprise on which our Lord entered was that this "Good News" should be continually conveyed to those who had not yet heard it. It must spread over a wider and ever wider area. It must continually reach new ears. In a word, it was a Kingdom whose very nature was to increase—a Kingdom that was in essence missionary.

The Nature of His Kingdom.—The similes used by Jesus Christ to express the nature of God's Kingdom drove home with force again and again its aggressive, transforming, revolutionary, militant character. "The Kingdom of Heaven is like seed sown"—it multiplies as the corn of wheat. It grows as the mustard seed. It spreads and simultaneously revolutionises the life that it touches, as the leaven in the measure of meal, changing the nature of the whole lump. Christ Himself as the supreme agent of that Kingdom is Himself its supreme missionary. He is the Good Shepherd Who, as His characteristic work, actually leaves the fold and goes out to find the lamb that is lost.

II.

The Kingdom Established Through Discipleship.—In beginning the establishment of that Kingdom Christ gathered, by the force of His preaching and His life, disciples ;—and out of those disciples He chose the men on whom His enterprise, as a whole, was to depend. History was to pivot upon the vitality of their faith and the loyalty of their lives to His ambition.

They were, like Himself, to do the will of God as His errand-men. And the name given to these men was the name "missionary;" the Greek word *apostolos* being the precise equivalent of the Latin "missionary." The meaning in both cases is "sent."

Every simile that Christ uses to describe them and their function has in it this same aggressive, militant meaning. "You are the light," He says, radiating, illuminating and revealing. "You are the salt"—penetrating, preserving and purifying.

Christ's idea of discipleship and through it of apostleship, was based on a thought of universal conquest by the divine propaganda of the Christian life and witness. He relied for His campaigns on His apostles and disciples,—in a word, on His Church. His extensive work among the common folk who "heard Him gladly," and His intensive work among the few disciples and fewer apostles to whom He taught day by day the elements of His "good news," were alike directed to this one end—to ensure the passing on, after He personally had gone, of His message to the Kingdom.

The command to His disciples, who are the Church, "Go ye into all the world," is not an addendum, or divine afterthought—it simply crystallizes the essential strategy of the whole campaign.

The Gospel, an Expansive Force.—The "Good News" of the Kingdom of God—the Gospel—is, then, essentially an expansive force. The Christian faith is not primarily or in origin either a book or a creed, or an organisation, but a vital force acting

through all three of these organs. The historic and eternal narrative of the Gospel is, of course, in a book,—The Bible. And, necessarily, directly we formulate in words the faith we hold, those truths are expressed in a creed. Moreover, the disciples—the missionaries—of that creed must, of necessity, work and live in and through an organisation expressing their corporate life as Christian folk—an organisation which we call “the Church.”

Its Instruments.—The Bible, the Creed and the Church are essential instruments of the missionary expansion of the Gospel. But they are its instruments and not its master. The Gospel created them. They live in so far as they express the spirit of the Gospel, and achieve its ends.

The Gospel is a force issuing from a Person, through men, and ending in a Kingdom. The Gospel is not only a force ; it is an “expeditionary force.” It is “Good News” which must by its very nature be communicated from generation to generation and from race to race. It is a message which must be told.

III.

Expansion, the Church's Necessity. — This expanding missionary nature of the Gospel, then, must necessarily govern all the expression and organisation of the Church. When Christ made the apostle the foundation on which the Church was built, He based the Church on the missionary—the man who would go out with the “Good News,” conveying it ;

proclaiming and placarding it ; witnessing to it ; bleeding for it ; announcing its universal truth, appealing for its universal acceptance.

The Church, then, in Christ's idea of it, exists not for itself, but for Himself and for His purposes ; and His purposes are summed up in the " coming of the Kingdom of God." The Church is not an end, but a means to an end ; and that end is the Kingdom of God without limitation of geographical frontier or racial character, or cultural quality or social status. It breaks down the greatest racial barrier—that between the Jew and the Gentile ; it spans the greatest cultural chasm—that between the Greek and the Barbarian ; it bridges the greatest social division—that between the slave and the free ; and it knows no geography.

Evidences of a Living Church. — The whole story of the Church from the day of Christ till now reveals the fact that, when it is truly living, it is essentially and automatically missionary, because, if it expresses His Will and God's Will, it cannot be anything else ; and if it does not express His will, it is not alive. Indeed, whatever it may be called, if it does not so express His will, it is not the Church. If it exists simply for the social amenities, the musical sensibilities and the intellectual pleasure of its members ; and if it does not use fellowship, art and intellect as agencies for the expanding Kingdom, it is a club or a Society, but not the Church. It is not the Church of the Good Shepherd if it can rest while any of His flock are lost in the wilderness or on the hills.

IV.

First Foreign Missionary Enterprise. — If we regard the Church at Antioch as the first truly Christian Church, the Church that broke out beyond the racial limitations of Judaism and drew in the Greek, the evidence that the living Church as inspired by the Holy Spirit is an essentially missionary church is overwhelming. That Church at Antioch in its corporate fellowship waited persistently and with ardour for the divine leadership of the Holy Spirit. That leadership explicitly commanded two things, both of them essentially aggressive and compassionate; in a word, missionary. The first was an act of social service in, as it were, the home field, for the relief of the famine; the second was a tremendous foreign missionary enterprise.

The argument for remaining to work purely in Antioch was, on the face of it, overwhelming. Antioch was the focus of the life of the Roman Empire. It was a central city through which, from the whole Mediterranean world on the west, from the Mesopotamian, Persian and even Indian world on the East, from the Syrian, Jewish and Egyptian world on the south, and from all the highlands stretching up between the Caspian and Black Sea flowed a constant pulsating stream of life. Influence exercised in Antioch radiated naturally along the routes of commerce everywhere. Antioch, too, was a very hot-bed of corruption and vice and a very citadel of Roman pride in power. Why go beyond the range of Antioch when such a

tremendous work remained to be done there ? What of the heathen at home ?

Every argument that has ever been used to buttress the criticism that missionary expansion is wastage of energy was as valid in Antioch as it ever has been or can be anywhere. But the clear Voice that the Church recognised as compelling was the Voice that led them to set apart, not their second or third-rate men, but their most splendid leaders, to go out into the missionary field. Barnabas and Paul—the wisdom and the brilliant leadership of Antioch—were sent out to carry the “ Good News ” into the whole world of that day.

If men arguing against the weakening of the forces in Antioch by sending away this expeditionary force had won their way permanently, the Christian Church would have degenerated into a tiny local cult, and perished from the world.

Christ, the Expulsive Force. — Real personal knowledge of Christ made the early Church a missionary Church. So Paul, with a statesmanship as superb as his heroism, and with both heart and mind at white heat, captured the capitals of the provinces of the empire one by one—not only Antioch, its Paris ; but Ephesus, its Antwerp ; Athens, its Oxford ; Corinth, its Liverpool ; Rome, its New York and London in one. The record of that campaign makes the book of Acts a book of missionary adventure. All the correspondence of Paul that we possess is in the form of letters to the Church in the mission field. Christianity

was no longer a Jewish cult, but a missionary religion claiming to save all men of every race.

Human tactics would have said to the Church "Concentrate in Antioch." The divine strategy drove it out on stony roads, amid perils of rivers and robbers, of stoning and scourging, prison and shipwreck, on the steep ascent of impossible tasks to an achievement that would be incredible if it were not true.

A Waning Missionary Spirit Brings Death.—When, however, the Church had captured the Roman Empire and a Christian Emperor sat on the throne, it spoilt its triumph by losing the very missionary spirit that had won its victories. It began to see itself as the end, and not the means. It became static instead of dynamic ; a fenced fold instead of a seeking shepherd ; an ecclesiastical organisation defending and expanding its own rights, gaining the world and losing its soul.

The Church, as it ossified, and became satisfied to be established, shrank in power even where it concentrated its forces. As it ceased to spend its energy on far-off campaigns, its heart suffered atrophy. "The first fine careless rapture" had gone, and the desire for adventure was largely spent. As a whole, the Church ceased to press forward its campaigns for the Christ Who brought it into being, or to serve the humanity He created it to save. And in that day was born its most tremendous scourge—Islam. If the Christian Church in the sixth century had made the will of Christ its supreme law, and had obeyed the Holy

Spirit's missionary command, that great spiritual genius it Mohammed, could have been a second Christian St. Paul, one of the greatest Christian missionaries in history. As it was, Islam, with all the frightful penalties it exacted from Christendom, was the fruit and the punishment of the Church's failure to be a missionary Church.

Again and again through history, in ways at once tragic and enheartening, the same essential truth flames out. From Raymond Lull and Francis, to Wesley and our own day, history speaks with one voice, proclaiming that the Church, when it lives, expands, and when it narrows its vision, dies.

Birth of Modern Missionary Enterprise.—When the spirit of God moved on the face of the waters in the eighteenth century, the immediate result was the opening of that romance of the Christian adventure—the modern missionary enterprise. Once the Church became alive and the vessel of a real experience, missionary expansion flowed automatically from Britain as it had from Antioch.

The conditions were radically different. There was no common language as between London, Calcutta, Tahiti, Macao and Kuruman, as Greek had been for Paul in every city from Antioch to Rome.

More vital still, there was no common basis of knowledge for the Briton to take for granted in approaching the philosophic Brahmin, the degraded Bushman, the cannibal Fijian, and the Confucian scholar, as there had been for Paul through the dispersed Jews and Hellenized citizens of the Roman

Empire. The circumstances differed, yet the fundamental truth of the principle that the Church of Christ must be a missionary Church shone, for that very reason, all the more clearly.

Its Universal Appeal. — This expansive power of the Church by the leaven of the Gospel has shown itself throughout to be independent of the racial character or the level of culture of the people called into the Church. The missionary expansion might seem simply to be a result of the nature of a race like the British or a people like the American, that they should express their religion, as they do their commerce, in terms of world-wide expansion ; but we cannot in that way explain the steady flow from the ease-loving indolent islands of the South Seas to the fever-stricken cannibal foreign field of Papua, nor the wonderful self-propagation of the Gospel among the Koreans ; nor the spontaneous and enthusiastic working of many thousands of Indians in a united campaign for winning their fellow people ; nor the heroic witness of Chinese Christians who preferred death at the hand of the Boxers rather than cease their witness to Christ.

It was sufficiently impressive when the Gospel transformed the lives of the cultivated Alexandrine Apollos and the slave Onesimus, the Jewish Pharisee Saul, and the Greek woman of pleasure, Damaris. It is, however, a still more wonderful and convincing witness to the world-wide validity of the Gospel and the catholic and apostolic character of the Church in its missionary enterprise, that the Chinese scholar and peasant, the South Sea Islander and the stone-age

Papuan, the Indian outcaste, the Brahmin philosopher, the Japanese student and the African tribesman are by the Gospel made "stones fitly framed together," and built into the eternal and universal Church of Christ.

V.

The Missionary Impulse.—Interpreting the word "missionary" to mean the impulse to lead all men to Christ, and to place all human life—individual, social, commercial, national, international, and inter-racial under His rule, the evidence both from the origin of the Church from God in Christ through the apostles and from its history through the centuries, proves that the Church that works God's will and that loves humanity, must be both in heart and in action missionary. It must always be breaking out and moving on. The Church that lives the life that Christ created it to live can never, this side of an achieved Kingdom of God, be a bulwark of the existing world order. It must always be the outpost of a new order. The Church must always be the sworn enemy of the *status quo* (things as they are), until the *status quo* is the Kingdom of God.

The Church's Programme.—The whole evidence, thus, of the nature of God, revealed in Christ and expressed in the Church, irresistibly leads to the conclusion that *the programme of the Church in a single sentence is to worship God and extend His kingdom*; that everything that achieves those ends is within the ambit of the Church's duty; that everything that impedes or distracts from those ends is definitely

not her business ; and that, like an army, the Church exists not to consolidate and defend its own fabric, but to defend God's Kingdom and to extend its conquests. The Church purely defensive is the Church petrified. If there is " more rejoicing in Heaven " over one lamb found than ninety-nine saved, the Church should reckon its success not by its buildings, nor even its numerical membership, but by its immediate converts.

Missionary Enterprise One.—If, then, the Church is to see its action in relation to the whole, it must also have the same wide view in terms of space. It must not be either geographically or racially sectional in view. In the mind of God there is no distinction between " Home " and " Foreign " Missions. For administrative purposes we are bound to retain such a distinction in organisation ; but in the mind of the Church, whether in its teaching, its preaching, its prayer or its offering, " Home " and " Foreign " can never be rightly set in opposition to one another. When the mandate to the Church is of two apparently competing duties—perform both. " This ought ye to have done, and not to have left the other undone."

The Missionary Enterprise, therefore, should be integral to the mind of the Church Meeting ; and central to meditation before the Sacrament, to prayer and preaching, to the Sunday School, and to all financial decisions, just as it is integral to the mind of Christ, Who is the Head of the Church and is its Quickening Spirit.

The Church's Expeditionary Force. — On the other hand, the Church of to-day is obliged, by the

magnitude and complexity of its missionary task, to create a specialized organisation to carry it out. For this reason the Church has created its Missionary Societies. The missionary society attached to a denomination, therefore, is not just an external organization like an orphanage or a hospital, which may or may not be supported at will. It is the Church acting on its missionary side. The Missionary Society is the Church's "expeditionary force," and is as such a part of the Church's essential self as is the army a part of the nation's self. It is the natural and proper pride of the Church to see that the missionary who campaigns at the farthest frontiers should, in complete confidence on its support, centre every power on the expansion of the Kingdom of God.

VI.

The Church's Extended Hand. — If what has been said here is true—and has always been true—it acquires for every man to-day an altogether new setting. If the Church does hold in her hands that secret of salvation, and if, holding that secret, she fails to communicate it to the whole world, and to communicate it immediately, surely it were better for her that a millstone had been hanged about her neck.

There is no hand, but Christ's pierced hand, that can save humanity from the abyss of barbarism. The races of the world have discovered through war that they cannot live to themselves; and that, whether in war or in peace they are bound up indissolubly in the bundle of life together. That pierced and

saving Hand, then, must be extended by the Church not to its own local environment—its city, its county, or its nation, not even to its own continent, or hemisphere, but to all humanity everywhere.

A New Urgency. — To-day, therefore, there has come a new reality into its Missionary Enterprise, a new and altogether overwhelming urgency; a breadth of appeal and a majesty of opportunity that have no parallel in the history of the Christian faith. The Church to-day is called to fling herself with unhesitating swiftness, with wise strategy, with universal charity, and in holy submission to the will of God, into the sublime and miraculous task of saving a doomed world and establishing the universal frontiers of the Kingdom of God.

VII.

The Congregational Church and the L.M.S. — The L.M.S. has never departed from its broad, undenominational basis—as defined by the Constitution (adopted in 1795)—“not to send to the heathen any form of Church Order and Government, but the *glorious Gospel of the blessed God.*” It has in the process of time become more and more intimately the servant of the Congregational and some other Churches for carrying the Gospel to the non-Christian world.

The L.M.S. has had a full measure of the apostle spirit. It was the first Protestant Missionary Society to send missionaries to Polynesia (1795), China (1807), Madagascar (1818) and New Guinea (Papua) (1871).

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